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Thousands in Turkey protest pope's visit

By BRIAN MURPHY, Associated Press Writer *Sun Nov 26, 11:24 AM ET*

Tens of thousands of protesters chanted "No to the pope!" and waved anti-Vatican banners Sunday in a defiant display of the pro-Islamic anger that could await the pontiff on his first papal trip to a mostly Muslim nation.

About 25,000 people filled a square in a working-class district of Istanbul at a rally organized by an Islamist political party whose leaders have denounced the pope's remarks in September that linked violence and Islam.

"The pope is not wanted here," said Kubra Yigitoglu, a 20-year-old protester in a head scarf, ankle-length coat and cowboy boots who called Turkey "an Islamic republic."

The demonstration highlighted the deep strains in Turkey ahead of the pope's four-day visit beginning Tuesday.

Turkish officials hope to use the visit to promote their ambitions of joining the European Union and to showcase its secular political system. But pro-Islamic groups — which have been gaining strength for years — perceive Pope Benedict as a symbol of Western intolerance and injustices against Muslims.

The pope plans to first meet with political and Muslim religious leaders in the capital, Ankara, including Turkey's president and the Islamic cleric who oversees Turkey's religious affairs. Turkey's prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, is scheduled to attend a NATO meeting in Latvia during the papal visit, but could briefly greet the pontiff at the airport.

Benedict later heads to Istanbul — the ancient Christian capital Constantinople — to be hosted by the spiritual leader of the world's Orthodox Christians, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I. The pope strongly backs efforts to close the nearly 1,000-year divide between the Vatican and the Orthodox churches.

The pope also is expected to continue the Vatican's efforts to heal rifts with Muslims. The Vatican has expressed regret for offending Muslims and sorrow for the violent backlash to his comments — which the Vatican said were an attempt to show the incompatibility between faith and violence.

At the Vatican on Sunday, Benedict expressed his "feelings of esteem and of sincere friendship" for Turks and their leaders. The Vatican spokesman also confirmed that the pope would visit Istanbul's famous 17th-century Blue Mosque as "a sign of respect" to Muslims.

The mosque, a major tourist attraction and prominent landmark on Istanbul's skyline, faces the Hagia Sophia, a former Byzantine church that was converted to a mosque following the fall of the city to Muslim armies in 1453. It is now a museum.

But Benedict may also use his time in Turkey as a forum to demand that Islamic nations offer greater rights and protection to Christian minorities, such as the remnants of the once-thriving Greek Orthodox community in Istanbul.

Turkey's foreign minister, Abdullah Gul, said Benedict's visit could help "remove some misunderstandings" between Christians and Muslims.

"The messages the pope gives here will, of course, be very important," Gul said at a news conference.

But the protesters sent a loud message that the pope is not welcome until he offers a full apology for his remarks, in which he quoted a Byzantine emperor who characterized some of Muhammad's teachings as "evil and inhuman," particularly "his command to spread by the sword the faith."

"The pope was disrespectful to us and he needs to apologize," said one banner at the rally, which is in the heart of Istanbul's conservative districts and is often the site of pro-Islam gatherings. More than 4,000 police — including riot squads — ringed the protest as police helicopters buzzed overhead.

Seafetin Tuleg, 70, wrapped himself in the red flag of the Felicity Party which organized the demonstration. He said Muslims revered the Jewish and Christian prophets but did not receive the same respect for their own.

"We love Moses, Jesus and Muhammad, but the pope doesn't love Muhammad and Islam," he said.

Officially, Turkey is a rigidly secular republic, though around 99 percent of its population is Muslim.

In 2004 — before becoming pope — the then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger cast doubt on whether Turkey has a place among EU nations.

"Turkey has always represented a different continent, in permanent contrast to Europe," he was quoted by the French magazine Le Figaro as saying.

On Sunday, Turkey's state-run Anatolia news agency quoted the Vatican spokesman, Federico Lombardi, as saying that the Vatican was not against Turkish membership in the EU. The Vatican city-state is not an EU member.

Associated Press writer Benjamin Harvey contributed to this report.

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